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ABSTRACT

"Computers and the Teaching of Composition," a graduate course for community college writing teachers taught at San Francisco State University, has two related objectives: to improve writing instruction and to teach writing teachers how computer-mediated writing tools and strategies can help provide students with powerful resources for writing in the academy and beyond. One of the focuses of the course is to introduce teachers to the vast world of wide area networks. Writing instruction in networked computer classrooms may have considerable advantages. The classroom dynamic seems better--less teacher-dominated and authoritarian, more exploratory, dynamic, energetic, and communal. On-line discussions seem to be more egalitarian; women and minorities appear to participate more frequently. The decision was made to introduce the teachers immediately to the wide area network by connecting to what is called "the InterClass," an on-line classroom conducted at three universities with three teachers and multiple guest participants. During the Spring of 1993, Computers and the Teaching of Composition became the first graduate English class in the country to connect with two other classes in this way. While InterClass participants could write to everyone using the InterClass list, they soon realized they could also write only to select individuals by sending messages to individual addresses. Participants discussed an incredible range of topics in the course of the semester, from women's speech apprehension in class to the advantages and disadvantages of networked writing classrooms. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

Hearing the Students' Voices: A Daedalus Convert Goes National

by Elizabeth Sommers, San Francisco State University <esommers@sfsu.edu>

Computers and the Teaching of Composition, the graduate course for community college writing teachers I teach each year at San Francisco State University, has two related objectives: to improve writing instruction and to teach writing teachers how computer-mediated writing tools and strategies can help students, provide them with powerful resources for writing in the academy and beyond. Both are important. While swift and efficient, the writing machine is not magic, but most teachers do not know how to use technology or how to teach their students to use it. This is not teachers' fault, of course. As former Education Secretary Terrel Bell has noted, "The supermarket checker has more high-tech support than today's teacher" (1993, p. A3). But teacher education programs in English are not doing nearly enough to address the problems that develop because of teachers' lack of education, resources and expertise, devoting at best only 5.7 hours to teaching writing teachers how to use computers in the classroom (Wresch). The result is that teachers enter their own classrooms unprepared to teach students how to adapt their writing processes to the new technologies they will use for their entire professional lives. Because we seldom address or even acknowledge the changing nature of communication in the information age, most student writers use computers ineffectively as fancy typewriters. In Computers and the Teaching of Composition , accordingly, I attempt to help teachers to narrow the wide gap between the often exaggerated claims for technology and research-based language instruction. By connecting theory and research to practice we explore promising uses of technology in writing classrooms that are student-centered, that take a process approach, that rely on inductive pedagogy, stress critical thinking and collaborative learning, privilege student texts.

Part of my purpose in Computers and the Teaching of Composition, the one I focus on here, is to introduce teachers to the vast world of wide area networks. Many computer neophytes are puzzled at first at the notion of individuals who are sometimes sitting in the same room writing on-line to communicate rather than simply talking, but writing instruction in networked computer classrooms may have considerable advantages. The classroom dynamic seems better (Barker & Kemp; Langston & Batson), less teacher-dominated and authoritarian, more exploratory, dynamic, energetic, communal. On-line discussions seem to be more egalitarian, women and minorities appearing to participate more frequently (Eldred; Langston & Batson; Selfe). Rather than the writing teacher leading and sometimes dominating discussions, only the more articulate and self-confident students joining in, every student participates. Many teachers report that students are often so enthusiastic and involved that they are unwilling to leave the classroom at the end of the hour. Small group participation also appears more balanced

(Langston & Batson), discussions less often dominated by loquacious or strong-willed individuals.

Students and teachers in networked writing classrooms work in writing-intensive environments, another change often leading to many more benefits (Hawisher). Rather than talking or listening to a teacher talk about writing, students are actively writing, practicing and receiving immediate feedback. When communicating to an authentic audience of their peers, students seem more likely to write for a real purpose, to take ownership of their writing and to articulate their ideas fully. Such writing experience prepares students for careers in business and many other fields, including academia, in which wide area networks are increasingly used both for discussion and collaborative writing projects.

Students in networked writing classrooms also have many creative opportunities for individual and collaborative learning. When given the option of using aliases (e.g. Cooper & Selfe), they sometimes explore their ideas more freely or experiment with persona, gender, voice. Groups of writers can role-play, acting out the parts of characters in a novel or an historical period, using interactive writing as an exploratory tool. Or students working together can hold debates, discuss their own or teachers' questions, carry out collaborative research projects. Afterwards students can leave with transcripts of the discussion, a record of the usually ephemeral classroom talk that can help with further thinking and writing. The potential seem unlimited to many writing teachers. Wide area networks (WANs), in short, provide many of the possibilities and audiences we want for our students, but in a larger rhetorical domain than the typical classroom can provide.

Since I wanted the teachers in Computers and the Teaching of Composition to use a network so they could experience the sort of interaction that is possible on a list and test the claims made for networked writing classrooms, I decided to introduce them immediately to the vast world of wide area networks by connecting to what we called *the InterClass, an on-line classroom conducted at three universities, a virtual classroom with three teachers and multiple guest participants. Very excited, I told my teachers that we were going to be involved in this InterClass. They seemed interested, probably because I was so excited, but dubious, probably because they had no idea what this meant. But I was determined.

While the technology was intimidating at first, San Francisco State University's part of the InterClass eventually triumphed. With the help of our Computer Training Coordinator every student had an account and a password within a couple of weeks. Meanwhile my colleagues offered me moral support from Texas as we struggled to communicate on-line ("I have deep sympathy for your situation" wrote Fred Kemp) assuring me that we would make it over this hurdle.

We did make it, of course. During the spring of 1993, Computers and the Teaching of Composition at San Francisco State University became the first graduate English class in the country of which I am aware to connect with two other classes in this way. The InterClass soon became a cornerstone of the course. Writing teachers both current and

future, of course, quickly recognized the rhetorical possibilities of the situation. Working either at home computers connected by modems or in the Academic Computing lab, they were able to compose messages that were delivered to all participants within seconds or minutes. They had the chance to talk with a number of the scholars on the syllabus, asking questions, discussing articles and ideas, getting the perspectives of peers in Lubbock and Austin as well as two other professors.

Some intrepid teachers started writing almost immediately. In the message I quote below, as in all messages, the first lines are a "header" with some interesting and decipherable information: the date, the sender, the list address and the subject. While the computer jargon was intimidating at first, teachers soon learned that they could create an "alias," a one word substitution for an entire address, making the procedure much more manageable. Most teachers soon seemed used to the strange, machine-generated headers preceding their messages to one another, reading and responding to meaning:

> Date: Tue, 2 Mar 1993 16:18:48 -0800
> From: Eleanor Smythe <smythee@BIGU.EDU>
> Reply to: INTERCLASS COMPUTERS & WRITING
> <CCCCC-L%TTUVM1.BITNET@ricevm1.rice.edu>
> Subject: joining in conversation
>
> One of Elizabeth Sommers* students at San Francisco State (the one trying to figure out how to plug in the modem.) I don't really know how to use this software yet, so I only hope that this message reaches its intended audience. Or is that the wrong metaphor for this virtual conversation? Or is conversation the wrong metaphor? But I digress--or does "digression," and the inappropriateness thereof, presuppose a linear model of discourse borrowed from the world of print which may or may not be applicable here? eeek--I feel like one of those puzzled horses at the race track who when the flag drops, the gates are flung open and the horses burst out and stream down the track, are left staring confusedly at their front hooves. . .

Other teachers at first quaked at the idea of the InterClass. Game though they were, many of them had never heard of a network three weeks ago. Unaware that I'd be able to give teachers the opportunity to work in a virtual classroom but aware that many might be apprehensive about computers, I'd planned to go slowly, starting with technological terms and an overview of the research on computers and writing, then venturing into work on reviewing and selecting software using National Council of Teachers of English guidelines. I'd planned that we spend the middle weeks of the course working on instructional strategies and curriculum. Only in the final third of the course would we move to networking, hypertext and hypermedia.

I didn't anticipate that Michael Joyce, certainly one of the finest hypertext fiction writers in the United States, would deliver the first paper my teachers would receive through

InterClass, a paper in which, as Fred Kemp put it, "Michael poignantly suggests we are in a golden age of transition; in so doing he is the only futurist I know who writes about hypertext nostalgically." While in my part of the InterClass we were still learning how to turn on the computers, compose text and print it out, Michael Joyce was asking teachers to consider matters such as these:

> In "the war between passion and technology" (as Porush calls it) we can take no sides. Passion or technology: each is us, we are the sides. So our approach ought to be as Cixous says of Clarice's, toward the "between us we must take care to keep." Thus we surrender to ourselves this battleground which we endlessly invent and represent.

"I'm a little overwhelmed," one teacher told me. So was I. While I had expected the InterClass to be interesting, I had not anticipated how fascinating and absorbing this new environment would be. Every day dozens of messages were whizzing back and forth from Texas to California, reactions to texts I'd never read before by teachers I'd often never met but whom I co-taught in a classroom without a physical location. At home every night I connected by modem to the VAX at San Francisco State University, then stared at my computer screen thinking about how and what to teach in this new classroom. I mulled over what guest scholars Michael Joyce or Trent Batson or Karen Schwalm said, what the teachers I was teaching had to say, what my co-teachers said. If I had something I felt was worth contributing I wrote it on my computer screen. Minutes later my words were available to anyone in the world who was connected to the InterClass (and a good number of interested academics lurked as our experiment unfolded). I might receive an immediate response from the author, a fellow professor, a student. Or I might never receive a response at all, a netsurfer's nightmare but a student-centered teacher's dream--no longer to seem the most important voice in the classroom.

While InterClass participants could write to everyone by writing to the InterClass list, they soon realized they could also write only to select individuals by sending messages to individual addresses, an option many San Francisco State University students seemed to relish. At one point the professors speculated about the evolving discourse communities, wondering about their number. We three wrote privately to one another about the course, the papers, our on-line personas, our teachers' responses, our own reactions. Some of the guest scholars wrote to one another about this new rhetorical situation. Our teachers wrote volumes to the InterClass discussing computers and writing as well as other subjects, as Susan did:

> On Monday night, I was speaking to Elizabeth about the very fact that I found it much easier to "talk" on the network than in class. I gave as an example my reply to Michael Joyce. I told her I have *never* questioned a professor's work before. I have asked questions about the text but I have not expressed a "negative" opinion (I told him the piece made me feel isolated.).
>
> What is the magic of the network? The network provides me with options which are not available in a face to face situation. I can reply in a manner

> which is not conventional. I ended my reply to Michael with a poem which I felt expressed my sentiments about his work much more clearly than I could. In person/in class, I could not have done that! I have time to think and compose. I can revise my thoughts. I don't have to wait for an "opening." The network is always "open." I, too, find it hard to speak up and talk because I sometimes think that what I have to say is not what the professor wants to hear. Like you, I also spend a lot of time contemplating what I would like to say and as a result, find that many opportunities to speak slip by. . .

Some of the Austin and Lubbock teachers wrote privately to one another, and at least one of our San Francisco State University teachers wrote privately to a student in Texas. Occasionally perturbed by an InterClass paper, teachers in my class would write their indignant reactions to our entire group without sending them to Texas. One dyad, I have been told, chose to discuss the InterClass discussion at great length without joining in, preferring I suppose the anonymity of private discussion. Sometimes students addressed their messages to specific individuals but sent them to the entire InterClass.

Most participants wrote to the InterClass sooner or later, though two of them held out all semester. Some became obsessed, reading and writing messages six or more hours a week. I walked into the Academic Computing lab one day and saw an InterClass member who waved me away, her eyes gleaming. "I can't talk to you," she said, "I'm defending positivism." Many teachers privileged the virtual classroom, joining and often leading discussions for hours each week, reading deeply, synthesizing earlier InterClass papers and messages, responding directly in thoughtful ways to the issues at hand. As Steven Gray noted during a discussion of the roles computer-mediated writing instruction might play in the community colleges:

> I don't know that my experiences as a graduate student at San Francisco State would be at all analogous to the experiences of students in community colleges, but if there is even the slightest similarity, then I think the computer conferences have great promise for improving academic integration of students. San Francisco State is one of the original screech-in-and-screech-out universities, and I often feel that I have become one of the most expert practitioners of the sorry art of screeching in and out. Usually I take one course per semester, and usually that one course meets one night a week. So I am not often among my peers. Though our program does a pretty good job of bringing people together (I do know, like and talk with classmates about course-related issues when I am on campus), I usually feel fairly disconnected, not integrated into either the social or academic worlds of San Francisco State (my guess is that I am not alone in this feeling). It becomes easier to consider dropping the program, doing something else. This semester, because of InterClass--even though I am mostly a lurker--I feel much more connected to my coursework and far more enthusiastic about the possibilities of teaching composition than I have in some time. It is still amazing to me that I can sit here some 20 miles from campus--and hundreds of miles from many of you--and participate in these conversations. There's

> nothing profound about this, of course, but a computer and modem overcome the limitations of time and space that most commuter students seem to encounter...

Participants discussed an incredible range of topics in the course of the semester, from women's speech apprehension in the classroom to the advantages and disadvantages of networked writing classrooms, resulting in hundreds of pages of printed text of the InterClass. While the volume of messages sometimes resulted in information overload, a common problem on networks, teachers found various ways to cope with the amount of material bombarding them--minimizing their electronic presence when necessary (also known as "lurking"), saving some parts of the discussion for future reference, sending poems rather than analytical responses, reading only immediately relevant material closely. Some teachers emerged as InterClass leaders, helping their fellow teachers by "weaving" strands of the discussion. As Hawisher explains, "weaving comments are those that unify the discourse, summarizing major points, pulling together the various threads, and integrating the various participants' contributions" (90). All three professors tried to weave the discourse but a number of us agreed that our InterClass master weaver was a fellow student, George Carr. I see this as a positive sign, an indication that authority did shift in this networked classroom and that conviction and talent became more important than institutional titles.

Some participants found the InterClass to be one of the most interesting and exciting experiences of their educational careers. Others remained deeply skeptical throughout the semester, anxious about the InterClass, unconvinced that this mode of communication was intrinsically more egalitarian, more valuable, more promising. Most teachers saw both advantages and disadvantages to this new sort of classroom. In all cases the InterClass was a great opportunity for teachers, including the skeptics, though it was actually only one part of a somewhat traditional seminar. This virtual classroom allowed teachers to do more than read about networking and its benefits. They experienced the excitement of having an authentic audience take their ideas seriously, of participating in intellectual discussions, of contributing their own voices to a community of scholars. Some also experienced the frustration of having eighty-eight messages in their mailboxes with one hour to read them, of not being able to afford home modems, of feeling overwhelmed by discussions, of having computers crash when they needed to work. But everybody persevered.

While I was the primary teacher for Computers and the Teaching of Composition at San Francisco State University, Fred Kemp, John Slatin and the invited guests did a great deal of teaching as well, one of many advantages the InterClass provided. Graduate students learned more than my perspective on any given subject, talking directly to authorities on hypertext, networked classrooms, teacher training. Participants also made professional connections with the leaders in computers and composition, often talking to them on a daily basis, telling them about their instructional situations and future plans, sharing their ideas and concerns, asking for advice about funding, facility planning, research directions. Only a rare graduate program can offer its teachers the sort of interaction we had on a daily basis last spring. And this interaction continues. When a group of leaders in

computer-supported instruction decided to form an Alliance to connect and support writing teachers using computer-mediated instruction, I used e-mail that same day to forward their introductory message to every InterClass member. Those who joined the Alliance, including Bay Area high school and community college teachers, are now a part of a national organization. While Computers and the Teaching of Composition has ended for the semester, we continue to reap the benefits of our collaborative effort.

Teachers learned about and now use many other resources available through the Internet, yet another advantage. Bill Condon of the University of Michigan provided all InterClass students with free electronic access to the 1993 Computers & Writing Conference, allowing them to send for papers and join discussion groups. Other participants have become involved in a list developed at M.I.T. called mediaMOO. After apprenticing on the InterClass, interested San Francisco State University students quickly learned how to get to the mediaMOO by telnetting to purple-crayon.media.mit.edu 8888. Registered guests on this list can create their own characters and names, choose to be male, female or genderless, emote, talk, whisper and yell to others, manipulate objects such as boats and bookshelves, move from room to room, create new rooms and objects. A number of InterClass members grew to enjoy going to the TechnoRhetoricians' Bar and Grill in the mediaMOO, ordering a virtual Guinness Stout from Lou the Bartender and settling in for some real-time discussion with other scholars.

As summer approached many teachers seemed wistful about the end of InterClass. Fred Kemp, who managed the list at Texas Tech/Lubbock, agreed to keep it alive for the summer. But once school was out, InterClass traffic was predictably slow. Network lists constantly change, participants coming and going, topics ebbing and flowing. Many InterClass members have moved on, using Internet capabilities in absorbing new ways. Teachers who in February had never heard of networks often send me e-mail messages about their research and teaching, their thinking and writing. Others are roaming in the mediaMOO, out and about on commercial lists, participating in electronic forums such as Megabyte University, exploring lists I've never seen and places I've never been.

The InterClass opened new vistas for me and helped me to understand how to get ready for the future. Twelve years from now the idea of sitting alone at isolated computers in solitary offices or classrooms will seem as strange as the idea of writing without a computer does to so many of us today. Already we teach in a time when networking opportunities allow us to experiment with a new form of language somewhere between speech and writing. This new medium allows ideas to move at lightning speed among people closer in time and space than we ever thought possible. But while new communication possibilities are transforming literacy, too often teachers are the stragglers instead of pioneers. I want to change this. I want to encourage students and colleagues to understand that none of us is isolated in a given place at a given time anymore. We need to offer language teachers and students a glimpse into this new world, ways to be a part of it, to shape it, strategies they can use to teach their own students and colleagues. A roadmap would be convenient but impossible to provide since this terrain has yet to be mapped. We will have to join our students to draw the map ourselves.

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